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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses upon the early identification of children's needs as they enter school. Certain basic considerations are set forth. These include the influence of unstated assumptions upon the development of early identification procedures; the interaction of early identification procedures with teaching functions; the necessity to make early identification data educationally relevant; the need for school boards continually to reassess early identification procedures; the importance of providing classroom teachers with regular, intensive inservice training and preparation; the need to include parents in the formal education of their children; and the requirement that early identification procedures be adapted by a school board to fit its school system. (DB)

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GOING BEYOND EARLY IDENTIFICATION

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Introduction

In the very limited time at my disposal I am able to present only the merest hint of a general position about the notion and practice of the Early Identification of Children's Abilities and Disabilities. This position is an entirely personal one although I do refer to a study conducted by Dr. Harry Silverman and myself, of the Department of Special Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto. This was funded by the Ministry of Education of Ontario, but I am not speaking as a representative of it and my views are not necessarily the views of the Ministry. However, I wish to express the gratitude of Dr. Silverman and myself for the support given by the Ministry to our study, and to bring you informally its greetings and best wishes for the conference.

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Early Identification

The term "early identification" is typically used to refer to the picking out of children at an early stage in their schooling for some reason, usually because they offer problems to the school system. This early discernment of problems is intended primarily to reduce by early remediation the number of children later requiring "special educational help". This traditional way of discussing early identification has a flavour of the "different" the "special" and the clinical (psychological

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or medical) rather than a general educational connotation. (In passing I may add, following several enquiries from conference participants, that I do not refer at all in this paper to the notion of children identifying with a new culture, an issue that I have discovered to be of great importance in Israel.)

My discussion of early identification, both as notion and practice, is based on the general understanding that I have developed of societal provision, including education, for young children, and especially of the type of teaching appropriate for them. Within this framework I refer to the findings of the survey just mentioned.

The Situation in Ontario

From the mid 60's onwards school boards in Ontario began to develop work in early identification of children entering schools; this work received support in Ministry of Education initiaties developed during the 70's. These comprised a limited number of research studies and a more general support of the development of identification procedures, although typically from a special education viewpoint. In a short study from 1978 to 1979, Dr. Harry Silverman and I attempted to survey the practice and degree of development, and to some extent the attitudes of school boards towards the work of early identification. An initial questionnaire survey of virtually all elementary school boards provided a general overview. A second, more detailed, questionnaire was sent to a sample of 27 boards and followed by interviews in order to establish that practice in more detail. The "mood" of the Province was asertained

through questionaires and interviews and through a conference organized by O.I.S.E. and the Ministry in June 1979, focusing on all aspects of early identification. Practice, attitudes and theory in Ontario show both similarities and dissimilarities to those in other countries, but time forbids discussion of these. However, comparison between Ontario and other areas has proved very useful in developing the basic position I now hold, some aspects of which are now presented.

Some Basic Perspectives

These ideas have been selected as salient; they are representative rather than comprehensive and I hope that the brevity with which they are presented does not distort them. They are not claimed as original nor dramatic, and although relationships between them are occasionally obvious, they of course require much more detailed exposition in order to establish those relationships. It is my hope, however, that the presentation of these points will encourage readers to analyse more closely the basic assumptions of early identification work.

1. First in studying early identification, I have become much more strongly aware of two facts: that educational practice derives from values, ideologies, attitudes and beliefs, about children, education, life and society; and that the values and attitudes which dictate practice need to be made explicit before and while practice is carried out. Thus, before one develops early identification procedures (or when one examines such work in practice) it is necessary to be clear about one's assumptions and to list them explicitly. For instance, in the Ontario Survey school boards often found it difficult to list their goals or the focus of their programmes; further, boards often shared goals with other boards but not procedures and vice versa. Perhaps the greatest danger is that early identification procedures may have implicit in them goals and directions not realized by those conducting such work, but nevertheless directive of that work, a process which leads to confusion.
2. The early identification process occurs and indeed exists, because of

something else, some other function, which pre-exists and indeed defines it, namely teaching; yet the literature too often yields the impression that early identification work focuses on children almost as entities independent of the educational process which is its raison d'etre. It is necessary for a system or teacher to know what it or he/she teaches to and about, and what conceptualization of the child is held, and then choose an identification procedure to deal specifically with these areas. A common temptation, inferred from the literature, is for procedures to be established less on the basis of what is important to look at, and decide on educational first principles, than on the basis of either existing techniques, such as tests, or on traditional and familiar areas of a psychological sort e.g., intelligence or perception. The reader is often left with the suspicion that what is being measured is what is measurable rather than what is worth measuring. In this whole area educators tend to think within a range of psychological contructs that are too narrow, and to act according to the conventions that derive from psychology rather than choose from a well variety of modes of thinking. The Tale wags the dog.

In the Ontario survey twenty-seven selected boards in interview tended to talk in terms of traditional categories used in educational assessment of young children - language, perception, fine and gross motor skills and the like, which was probably caused in part by such traditional constructs being presented to them in the first, written, questionnaire. However, even in free-flowing interview discussions, there was an emphasis apparent on talking within the terms of these traditional constructs as a first level - as having priority, so to

speak. The personnel involved typically went on to discuss how information on a child in such terms was then translated into information usable by classroom teachers. This second stage process was more ad hoc, and less formalized than the ascertainment of a childs level of functioning on e.g., language and perception, though it was considered of great importance. What was clear, however, was that the conceptualization of children as learners was a derivative, and consequence, of a conceptualization of children as perceivers, language users, fine motor performers and so on. There is a case to be made for this as a legitimate psychological perspective; I don't think it is an educational perspective in that it is too static, not sufficiently dynamic, and depends on constructs that are too narrow for educational use without translation into broader and more flexible ones.

3. Related to the above point but important enough to be discussed on its own is an idea which, though again not original, has become for me the most important single emphasis in my position in early identification work. In fact the exposition of this idea necessarily involves this paper taking a radically different direction and almost abolishing the term "early identification" or at least reducing it to a subordinate status. In brief, I propose that the most useful service we can perform for young children and their teachers in their earliest school experience is to carry out an early review of each batch of entrants, aiming to cover all areas of functioning in school, and intended to provide information of a sort that will give teachers a flying start in programming, teaching and further enquiring about all their children. In order to give teachers such a start the information provided by such

a review must be educationally relevant, immediately usable (that is, requiring little translation from the language of other disciplines) and in functional terms. Information must be teaching-oriented and descriptive of a child's current status in developmental or functional terms, thus enabling a teacher to pinpoint where a child is developmentally in a given area and therefore where to begin teaching him or her. Prediction is not an aim; indeed it is probably inimical to the emphasis on current functioning for immediate teaching.

Such a developmental review procedure will yield a developmental profile for each child; many of these will of course demonstrate current performance which is outside age expectations, either above or below, and/or wide differences within a profile between different areas of functioning. Without recourse to any finite labelling, teachers can readily keep an eye on children with such profiles, emphasizing in the programming for any teaching of such children components they consider may encourage more rapid or complete development. Routine monitoring by the teachers will provide the evidence for the degree of success (or otherwise) or such teaching.

Thus, within this notion of developmental review of children's abilities is contained the notion of early identification of children's difficulties but without the associations of directive labelling of segregation (psychological or physical), or categorization as "different". Further, the same framework easily contains the notion of further investigation of children causing concern or puzzlement as a result of a general assessment; more specialized and detailed investigation can and should be conducted and the results fed back to the teacher for programming,

teaching, monitoring and further assessment. Developmental review can thus be a two-stage process for any child requiring such investigation. However, it would be a mistake to think of developmental review as essentially an initial assessment for all and an initial and second assessment for some rather, developmental review should be conceived of as a process of ongoing assessment throughout a child's early school experience, perhaps through his first (typically kindergarden) year, with the teacher continuously checking the progress of each child in the developmental terms. The initial stage of the process should be most intensive, as the child is unfamiliar to the teacher, involving a concentration of personnel and procedures (interviews, tests, observation etc.), but the information generated from this initial stage must be seen and used as initial, and not predictive or definitive.

4. A fact that I think many school board personnel are reluctant to realize is that the process of "early identification" - and I would now add developmental review - requires continuous decision-making. Further, the points or stages at which decisions are required are often not recognized. First, recognition has to occur that developmental review or early identification are in fact processes, dimensions of educational provision; in the Ontario survey it often seemed that early identification was perceived as an adjunct to the educational system, an "extra". The second type of decision has to do with the acknowledgement or establishment of the body which will conduct the process and have overall responsibility for it. Often this does not happen; there is not a recognition that such a body is required beyond the creation of groups or committees for specific activities such as selection or tests.

Three major groupings of decisions are identifiable and I think that they all require to be seen within the common framework of developmental review or early identification. These connected labels are to be decided on by the same group of personnel. The overall system level I have outlined; then there is the level of procedures that express the system, the choice of e.g., who does initial assessment work, at what times in the school year it is carried out, how parents are to be used or involved, how information is to be recorded. Lastly there is the level of choosing the specific techniques and the materials to go with them, interviews and schedules, testing and specific tests, observation and checklists. Ongoing throughout any system of developmental review or early identification is also the process of evaluation of monitoring; again decisions have to be made about how this is to be done, and supervision and application of its results are critical. Relative to this is analysis of materials chosen; tests need to be critically examined for relevance and psychometric characteristics e.g., validity. Typically boards in our survey did not have a well-established body to supervise and the systematic evaluation was minimal, both of procedures in general and of materials in particular. This seems to reflect practice in general whatever country one looks at.

The composition of an organizational group varied in our survey and in the literature. Often, (too often) the deficit emphasis of early identification was reflected in the heavily special education orientation of a committee, my preference is for a group composed mainly of early childhood education and curriculum specialists but incorporating

Special Education and Psychology Department representatives. Personnel from the latter two areas tend to have more experience in techniques of assessment and materials as well as being the appropriate groups to deal with second stage assessment of children showing development of an unusual sort. But the focus of developmental review and early identification is a provision of information and guidance for teachers, and so the composition of the organizational body should reflect this; specialists in early childhood education and curriculum are typically best equipped to provide a teaching focus and to relate or direct procedures to teachers concerned.

5. A fifth principle of early developmental review and early identification work is that the key role of classroom teachers should be explicitly recognized by intensive in-service preparation and ongoing training in the principles and practice of all aspects of such work. It is ironic to notice that while teachers are given highest priority, the key role, in carrying out the teaching of children involved in developmental review of early identification procedures, or intervention programs, as one moves back through the stages of this work away from the classroom, teachers' contributions become less important. In our survey, which again reflects typical practice in the literature, teachers did much assessing though often under supervision or the aegis of special education or psychological personnel. They were less involved in the selection either of assessment instruments or packaged programs for teaching when such were used, and at the board decision-making level no more than half the boards involved them in any capacity in a committee overviewing the early identification procedures.

Some major shifts in perspective are required regarding the role of both teachers and their employers. Teachers traditionally see themselves as "less" professional than psychologists, consultants, special educators and the like; they do not generally consider themselves competent to decide on what should be assessed in children and how to do it; they see themselves as the recipients of information and guidance but not as having a share in the development of the basic information which guides programming and teaching. Boards tend to see teachers in the same way. Further, specialist work such as special education and psychological assessment continues to wear a cloak of mystery, of "specialness" that it doesn't deserve. Territoriality, the poverty of pre-service training and traditional societal attitudes are all involved, though I cannot develop the themes here, and they would have to be addressed in any in-service scheme but I do wish to insist that because teachers are the logical people to dominate the developmental review process they must therefore be given the appropriate training. It is probably best done on an in-service basis, but that training must go far beyond simple and casual use of professional development days or an occasional workshop. There must be a systematic training, in stages if needed, with competence to be established and demonstrated, and outside help may well be required by boards. Yes, it would cost money, time and effort on the part of a board and a great deal of discussion before decisions could be made, but the quality of developmental review work depends on the quality of the teachers involved, and that in turn rests on solid training. In our survey teachers were hugely emphasized but in-service training was typically informal and casual.

This should be one component but much more is needed. Strong leadership is required here from boards, superintendents and directors, ministries and departments of education.

6. Developmental review gives schools and school systems an excellent and, I think, unique opportunity to blend the different types of attention given to children from three sources - school, families and preschool agencies. I think schools are now in a position to give leadership of a most valuable sort at the moment when children enter them for the first time. After all, children are to be captive for many years in the school and the latter can do much at this point to determine the quality of a child's attitude to school henceforth, and of the relationship of the school and the family. Therefore, I should like to see a hugely extended set of arrangements for introducing new parents to the school system, especially immigrant parents and those in disadvantaged settings; interviews can be held before children enter the school relating to the school's mode of functioning and to the child's way of behaving. Parents (don't forget Father) can be asked to observe, use very general checklists and discuss their observations at a later date. Assessment results can be conveyed to parents and the school's program outlined with suggestions of how to support this by activities at home etc. Parent workshops can be arranged to cover all aspects of the developmental review process within a general framework of introducing the parents to the school's work. This may involve more work, though I think it represents a re-arrangement and improvement of work much more than a new type of work.

One untapped resource of growing importance in Ontario, of great importance in Israel, and of varying importance in other countries is Day Nurseries,

Nursery schools and equivalent agencies. With increasing numbers of children attending preschool, placements which in organization, systematic attention and developmental focus really are precursors of that school system, it is wasteful not to take note of what children have done in such placements. Interviews could be arranged with personnel of these agencies, mutual visits and at least the transfer of documents well before the child enters the school system.

7. A last point is that developmental review is, in being a process rather than a set of techniques, not merely something that can be filtered or injected into an educational system or attached to it. Every board or system has to develop the procedures that suit it ideologically and practically; its developmental review system will be necessarily unique. There is no one way to conduct developmental review or even early identification. Though many boards in our survey and many systems in the literature seemed to think within this sort of belief. On the other hand criteria can be established using the experience of others and applying the latter to one's own system, such criteria must be explicit, continuously reviewed and developed, but not become fixed regulations.

In Conclusion

This bare sketch is not idealistic. Its conceptual approach reflects both educational first principles and work occurring though in patches, in Ontario, Israel, the U.S.A., the United Kingdom and Continental Europe. I have merely pulled points together in an embryonic and incomplete rationale. Recommendations on how to carry out such ideas can only be made properly in a local setting in the light of local conditions but I think the time is ripe for bold demands and strong conceptualizations, I hope I have offered a few of both.